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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 007007

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH EDUCATION MINISTER CELIK

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR ERIC S. EDELMAN FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) & (D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: In the Ambassador,s October 31 courtesy call on Huseyin Celik, Minister of National Education and a co-founder of the AK (Justice and Development) Party, Celik praised the high level of educational cooperation between the U.S. and Turkey. While characterizing himself as a friend of the United States, he criticized American foreign policy for creating and embracing dictators. He spoke only briefly about the controversial and highly politicized draft law for higher education reform, but asked for another meeting with the Ambassador in the near future. END SUMMARY

Challenges in Education

2. (C) At the outset of the meeting, Minister Celik characterized as excellent relations between the U.S. and Turkey in the area of educational exchange. The Ambassador noted that approximately 12,000 Turkish students are currently enrolled in U.S. universities, making Turkey our eighth largest source of international students, above any other European or predominantly Muslim country. He noted the successful Fulbright program, with active exchanges in both directions, and the large English Language Fellows program in Turkey, which includes a curriculum specialist working at the Ministry of Education. The Ambassador stressed that Turkey and the U.S. face the common challenge of educating citizens to the highest standard in order to compete in the global economy.

3. (U) Celik said that a \$300 million World Bank project dedicated to restructuring Turkey,s secondary school system has just been completed, and that a second tranche of \$300 million will soon be available to continue these reforms. Turkey, he added, would like to benefit from good models in western countries rather than copying the educational systems of neighboring countries such as Iran, Iraq, and Syria. He described the emphasis on rote memorization and the lack of critical thinking as a great weakness in Turkey's current educational system. In addition, he noted that while at present 34% of Turkey,s students are in vocational schools and 66% are in regular schools, this ratio should be reversed. He said that each year two million Turkish students wish to enter Turkish universities, but there is space for just 10% of this number. He said that some of the approximately 100,000 Turkish students studying abroad, many elect this course because there is no space for them in universities at home. If tuition were lower in American universities, he said, Turkey would send four times as many students to the U.S.

4. (U) Although the Minister is at the center of a controversy over higher education reform, he spoke only briefly about this issue. He said this government,s efforts to reform the university system mark the first time a civilian authority in Turkey has taken on this difficult task. (The previous four major reforms were all undertaken following military coups.) The Minister argued that the draft educational law would change the entrance requirements for universities, creating a level playing field for graduates of vocational schools and imam hatip8 high schools (in addition to the regular state-set core curriculum, imam hatip schools have courses in theology and the Koran) who are now penalized in the numerical coefficient that determines university admissions.

5. (U) The Ambassador contrasted education in the Arab world and in Turkey by recounting the findings of a recent UNDP Arab Development Report. Among the factors behind the slow development of the Arab world are dysfunctional educational systems, lack of democracy, lack of opportunities for one half of the population (women), limited penetration of the Internet, and few venues or means for the free expression and dissemination of ideas. The Ambassador noted that these constraints diminish artistic as well as scientific achievements. While the entire Arab world now produces only

about 1900 literary works in a year, Turkey alone produces a similar number annually. The Ambassador predicted that as Turkey moves closer to Europe, the educational gap between Turkey and the Arab world will further increase.

Dictators, Iraq, and the Halki Seminary

16. (C) Turning to foreign policy, Minister Celik characterized himself as a friend of the United States and said that, as such, he wanted to give the U.S. some friendly advice. He lamented that too often the U.S., in pursuing its national interests, has created &Frankensteins8, such as in Iran and Saudi Arabia. The U.S. motto, he said, seems to be &my dictator is a good dictator.8 Celik said that on March 1 he voted against Turkey opening a northern front for the U.S. into Iraq because the U.S. continued to support Pakistan,s Prime Minister Musharraf after he brutally suppressed citizens who protested his alliance with Washington. On the other hand, Celik said that last month he voted in favor of sending Turkish troops to Iraq because &Iraq needs peace.8

17. (U) The Ambassador replied that the Minister's point is one reason that President Bush has stressed the need for more accountable governments and more transparent economies. He added that a closed political system with a high unemployment rate, particularly among young adults, is a recipe for social explosion.

18. (C) The Minister raised the issue of the Halki Seminary, emphasizing that while Turkey has made concessions to its Greek minority, the Greeks have not done the same for the Turkish minority in Greece. He said that while the problem of Halki has not yet been settled, it is not insurmountable. The Ambassador, in turn, emphasized the importance of resolving the Halki issue prior to President Bush,s visit next year, especially since the President would probably meet with the Ecumenical Patriarch. He added that if the school were forced to move elsewhere, Turkey,s prospects for EU accession would dim. Celik stressed the problems faced by the Turkish minority in western Thrace, but repeated that the opening of Halki would be consistent with democratic principles. The Ambassador also noted the positive effects that a resolution would have on Turkey,s relations with the U.S. and with the influential Orthodox community in particular.

19. (C) Finally, Celik was critical of tighter visa and security requirements in the U.S. He complained that on a recent official trip to the U.S. he was required to remove his shoes at an airport security check. The Ambassador noted that Al-Qaeda was still trying to use shoe bombs. Celik cited the difficulty many Turkish students encounter in obtaining a visa, saying it is &harder to put a camel through the eye of a needle8 than it is to obtain a U.S. visa. At the conclusion of the meeting, Celik expressed his desire to have a follow-up meeting with the Ambassador at the Embassy where he could be more &critical8, which we interpret to mean to speak more openly about the issue of higher education reform.

110. (C) COMMENT: Celik has tried to reform the primary/secondary and higher education system, which all but a tiny fraction of Turks recognize as essential. However, the general perception is that the present draft law does little to improve the quality of university education. Rather the debate has been over who will control higher education. Furthermore, the legislative drafting and related public relations campaign has not been handled effectively. Owing to entrenched opposition, a Halki solution remains more difficult than Celik has recently implied in public statements. His remarks to the Ambassador reflect the probable continuing GOT approach, which will be to seek a reciprocal step from Greece. END COMMENT.

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